Talking in the Library

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October 26, 2010

K-State Keepsakes: K-Hill

26th in the Series

(View of K-Hill from Bluemont Hill, October 2010)

When asked to describe what the Manhattan area might look like, it can be assumed that strangers to the "Little Apple" with images of Dorothy and Toto dancing in their heads would never conger up descriptors such as scenic hills,tree lined streets, flowing rivers, and large lakes. But wait, there's more! A "mountain" high enough to adorn large white concrete "KS" letters to look over a valley is also part of the landscape, letters that proclaim, "'Hollywood,' California ain't got nothin' on Manhattanville!"

So how did a monogram gain the tradition of standing watch over a college town? You have to go back over a century to find a trace of such an idea when in 1908 a battle ensued over the side of Bluemont Hill (east of campus and north of downtown) between those supporting the placement of the letters KSC and others who insisted that an A for agriculture had to be included. Therefore, shortly after KSC first appeared on Bluemont Hill, objectors replaced the S with an A, making it KAC. The nocturnal switcheroo of letters by their supporters even included a KSAC version on the slope. However, the stone changers soon abandoned their causes leaving the opportunity for Prospect Hill across the Kansas River on the other side of town to become the permanent home for K-State's initials a few years later. Bluemont Hill did not go neglected; it became the home for "MANHATTAN" in 1927.

In 1915 plans were developed by engineering students on campus to construct a K on the side of Prospect Hill (the current site of the letters KS) but the project never got off the ground (pun intended!). The K-Hill that is familiar to Manhattanites and K-Staters today became a reality in 1921 when groups of engineering students met several times

starting in April to prepare a formal plan for constructing a giant K on the hill. Engineering students were dismissed from classes, freshmen and juniors in the morning and sophomores and seniors in the afternoon to work on the K. The proceedings began in Aggieville where a brass band led a parade of engineering students and others to the top of Prospect Hill. Horse drawn wagons loaded with sand and water were taken there to make the concrete, and rocks had to be gathered and crushed. The letter, costing approximately $350, measured 80 by 60 feet and included a bronze star in the center to honor K-State students who sacrificed their lives in World War I. The location became known as K-Hill (today it is also referred to as KS Hill).

Not content with a solitary K, engineering students under the leadership of Sigma Tau honorary society raised $500 in 1930 to finance the construction of an S. It took one day of hard labor to clear and level the land next to the K and on May 10 students were dismissed from class to finish the letter. When rain halted work around noon, one account reported that students adjourned downtown to the Manhattan Community Building where they were served barbeque sandwiches. With the stoppage of rain, they returned and completed the S that evening. With an U.S. Army spotlight on the letters, the honorary society presented the S to the city and college.

Unstable ownership of the land proved worrisome to the engineering students and college because a long term agreement with land owners was necessary. Sigma Tau attempted to purchase the land on which the letters resided but the cost was prohibitive. In the spring of 1947 it was able to obtain the 220 foot wide strip of land that included the letters plus room for a third initial along with easement rights to the property. In exchange, fraternity members agreed to survey and subdivide the property for the land owners, A.F. and Anna E. Woodman. Sigma Tau was able to receive a deed to the property; however, the honorary fraternity could not legally retain ownership. At a college assembly on October 16, 1947, the deed was presented to the college by professor L.V. White, adviser to Sigma Tau. President Milton Eisenhower accepted it for K-State.

Many people may wonder why not a letter U on the hill side? Feasibility studies revealed that a large gully existed where the U would reside making the cost for filling in and stabilizing the land substantial. In 2003 it was estimated that the price for ground work alone would be at least $200,000.

While lovely to look at from campus and Manhattan, events atop the hill have not always been heavenly. In 1987 a pickup truck was set afire and pushed down the hillside; a driver was injured when her car accidentally tumbled down the hill in 1999; also that year, four people were injured when a car driven by a 14 year old plunged down the slope; and the next year a man was reportedly stabbed by four men who attacked him during the night. In addition, it was not uncommon for Jayhawk fans to redecorate a letter or two with red or blue paint!

Visitors to the vista have not always been litter free and everything from beer bottles to sofas has found their way over the edge. Although the members of the engineering honorary society Tau Beta Pi (which replaced Sigma Tau in 1973) have routinely sponsored the maintenance of the letters, the hillside down to McDowell Creek Road at the bottom is owned by the university. Nonetheless, on at least one occasion since 2000, students with assistance from Riley County work crews have cleared the area of debris.

Given the events chronicled above, it is understandable why a locked gate was put at the bottom of the gravel road that leads over privately owned land to the top of the hill. Apparently vandalism to a cellular phone tower near the letters was the deciding factor in closing access to vehicles. From the lack of reported incidents on the hill it is apparent that trouble declined once cars were banned around 2000.

K-Hill was accused of displaying another type of litter in 1985 when an assistant professor of environmental design at K-State wrote a letter to the editor of the *Collegian* calling the KS letters "graffiti on the countryside landscape" which indicated "disrespect for the land" by the honorary society. The professor went on to ask for the removal of the K and S. The letter did not go unanswered. A senior in construction science took the professor to task in a response published in the newspaper.

An impressive constant since 1921 has been the commitment of the members of Sigma Tau, Tau Beta Pi, and engineering students to maintain and paint the letters. From afar, it may seem like an easy task for students to white wash the letters and keep the area free from vegetation. As the images included here illustrate, considerable risk is involved as the slope of the hill is nearly vertical. As one can see, the ropes tethered to students are not there for show!

For those who appreciate what the letters add to the atmosphere and tradition of Manhattan and K-State, and others who take the initials for granted, the thousands of students who have been responsible for their construction and upkeep since 1921 are owed a debt of gratitude for the letters that have maintained their vigil over the community and campus for almost 90 years! Like football season, fall brings the long standing ritual of cleaning and whitewashing the letters by engineering students and thereby providing an alternative meaning to the yell, "Go K-State!"

Members of Tau Beta Pi on K-Hill, Oct 10, 2009

Tony Crawford, University Archivist

Sources: University Archives Vertical File-Subject: K-Hill: contains newspaper and periodical articles from the *Kansas Industrialist*, *Kansas State Collegian*, *K-Stater*, *Kansas State Engineer*, *Student's Herald*, and *Manhattan Mercury*. Photographs: University Archives-Subjects-K-Hill; recent scenic views courtesy the author; views of students on K-Hill in 2009 courtesy Tau Beta Pi, College of Engineering.

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